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Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 529th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 7 October 1998, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. RODRIGUEZ CEDEÑO (Venezuela)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

ANNUAL THEME: INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND BURDEN-SHARING IN ALL ITS ASPECTS: NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR REFUGEES (agenda item 4) (A/AC.96/898 and A/AC.96/904) (continued)

1. Mr. KYDYROV (Observer for Kyrgyzstan) said that there were nearly 50,000 refugees in his country, i.e. 1 per cent of the total population. Despite a difficult social and economic situation, the Kyrgyz Government was doing all in its power to fulfil its obligations under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. At the national level, a number of legislative measures relating to refugees had been taken. Operations had begun on the voluntary repatriation of Tajik refugees. A technical cooperation programme had been prepared with representatives of UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (OIM) to control migratory flows and to protect the rights of refugees and migrant workers. The Government attached the greatest importance to that preventive programme, which could prove useful to other countries in the region.

2. The strategy being pursued at the regional level consisted in setting up a permanent consultation system in order to promote consensus, despite national differences, on the need for solidarity and burden-sharing. In 1998, two important regional conferences had taken place, one devoted to Afghan refugees, the other to migrations in central Asia. It might be possible further to develop a regional approach of that kind, taking account both of the economic opportunities in host countries and the level of development of their democratic institutions, and of the social, political and economic situation in the countries of origin.

3. For Kyrgyzstan, a country whose economic resources were limited and where political liberalization and democratic reforms were under way, the acceptance of Tajik and Afghan refugees was a heavy burden, particularly as such population movements went hand in hand with illegal migration, increased drug trafficking and evidence of religious extremism, which represented a threat to national security and the stability of the region as a whole. Active assistance from the international community and a sharing of responsibility were therefore needed to help with, for example, preventive measures and the political decisions that had to be taken, especially in view of the risk of an inflow of refugees as a result of the situation in Afghanistan.

4. Given the globalization of political, social, economic and humanitarian processes, the protection of refugees and respect for their rights should be the cornerstone of international solidarity and burden-sharing in the twenty-first century. The Kyrgyz delegation therefore suggested that the Executive Committee should consider, at its fiftieth session, the theme, "National legislation and international judicial mechanisms for protecting refugees and safeguarding their rights in the modern era", in order to review the experience gained and to pave the way for a revision of the 1951 Convention and the possible adoption of a second protocol that would reflect the realities of the day. His delegation took the opportunity to invite the relevant international organizations such as UNHCR, OIM, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization for Security and

Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe and the European Union to provide assistance with training and information in countries with few experts in international law or administrators, in order to enable them to take the necessary decisions in the area of refugee protection.

5. Ms. INYUMBA (Observer for Rwanda) expressed her Government's gratitude to the United Nations agencies and to donor countries for the help they had given to Rwanda. She particularly thanked the High Commissioner, Mrs. Ogata, for her support for the Rwandan refugee reintegration programme and for the initiative to help Rwandan women and children at risk, although the programmes were currently losing momentum for lack of funds.

6. During the past three years, more than 3 million Rwandan refugees had returned to a country devastated by genocide. The Government, with the support of the international community, had begun repairing the infrastructure, but much remained to be done to reintegrate the returnees, in particular in terms of basic social services (housing, drinking water, health and education). In addition, Rwanda was hosting around 40,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who might have to stay quite some time, especially as the conflict in their country still had ethnic overtones and involved incitement to genocide.

7. The Government of Rwanda was concerned about the continued exile of Rwandans in a number of African countries. Their return was hampered by the fact that some of them, in their flight from the conflict in the former Zaire, were moving ever further from Rwanda. As a result, genuine refugees were being manipulated by the very people who had planned and committed the 1994 genocide. Rwanda therefore called for the help of the international community so that Rwandan refugees could be repatriated and those responsible for the genocide in 1994 could be brought to justice, either in the countries of asylum or before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, in Arusha.

8. The Government would continue to work with UNHCR and the international community in seeking durable solutions to refugee problems. It was important to note, in the context of solutions such as asylum or resettlement in a third country, that certain Rwandan refugees were involved in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for essentially terrorist purposes. The delegation of Rwanda urged the international community not only to show solidarity through humanitarian action, but also to play its due role in conflict resolution in Africa.

9. Mr. Man-Soon CHANG (Observer for the Republic of Korea) said that his delegation was gravely concerned by the increasingly dangerous conditions in which UNHCR staff members all too often found themselves working. All interested parties should make a concerted effort to ensure the safety of UNHCR personnel and other humanitarian workers in the field, whose protection and assistance activities currently benefited 22 million people. Such figures were an indication of the proportions of the humanitarian crises that threatened international peace and security and put pressure on social and economic conditions, the environment or the political situation in host countries. The international community should therefore show solidarity, not only in order to lighten that burden, but also in order to maintain peace and security.

10. The delegation of Korea believed that burden-sharing would help to ensure respect for the basic principles of refugee protection (asylum, non-refoulement and family unity, inter alia) and promote the search for durable solutions. In that regard, the quotas set for receiving refugees or asylum-seekers should be flexible enough to accommodate humanitarian considerations such as family unity. Burden-sharing also implied political and security actions to address the causes and consequences of refugee movements. In addition, developing countries, which were plagued by serious economic problems, would find it difficult to continue to apply a generous policy if the developed countries did not set an example by protecting and assisting refugees.

11. It was in everybody's interests for the humanitarian and political problems associated with refugee movements to be resolved through international cooperation, and UNHCR should ensure that activities were coordinated. Global stability and development depended on the containment of forced migration. The Republic of Korea, for its part, was determined to help shape an international approach to refugee protection. During its presidency of the United Nations Security Council, the Republic of Korea had initiated a debate on the issue, thereby giving the Council a rare opportunity to discuss the complex situation of refugees. In addition, during the past three years, the Government had substantially increased its contributions to UNHCR programmes. Its contributions to the general programmes had increased 15-fold, rising from $100,000 in 1994 to $1.5 million in 1997. Despite its current financial difficulties, the Republic of Korea intended to continue to support UNHCR.

12. Ms. EIVAZOVA (Observer for Azerbaijan) said that, as a result of Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan, its occupation of 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territory and the policy of ethnic cleansing being carried out by the aggressor, there were currently around 1 million refugees and displaced persons in Azerbaijan out of a total population of 7.5 million. The material costs arising from the destruction of housing, enterprises and social infrastructure amounted to tens of billions of dollars. The humanitarian situation in Azerbaijan was disastrous and every year epidemics claimed hundreds of victims from among older persons, women and children living in refugee camps. Indeed, the infant mortality rate in the camps was one of the highest in the world: 20 per cent of the children died before the age of one. Although a ceasefire had been in effect since May 1994, there had still been no political settlement of the conflict and the plight of the refugees and displaced persons remained a subject of concern for the Government of Azerbaijan.

13. Her delegation expressed its sincere gratitude to the Governments and agencies, including UNHCR, that had given assistance to the refugees and displaced persons in Azerbaijan after the Security Council and the General Assembly had adopted resolutions on the population displacements and the humanitarian emergency there. She particularly thanked UNHCR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank for their support for the launch of the Government's programme to resettle refugees and rehabilitate the war-damaged areas. She asked the international community to make an effort to strengthen its solidarity and the principle of

burden-sharing in order to help countries that, despite enormous political, economic and social problems, continued to host large numbers of refugees and displaced persons.

14. Ms. CEK (Observer for Croatia) said that her country was still suffering the consequences of the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the destruction of their homes and of the surrounding urban infrastructure. Since the end of the mandate of the United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES), Croatia had assumed responsibility for administering Eastern Slavonia and continued to try to facilitate the return and peaceful coexistence of different ethnic communities. More than 21,000 Croats who had fled the area seven years before had returned to their homes, but 50,000 others had not yet been able to do so for lack of housing and employment opportunities. In June 1998, the Croatian Parliament had approved a comprehensive programme for the return and accommodation of refugees and displaced persons which had been given a unanimous welcome by the international community. The programme had confirmed the inalienable right of return for all those who could be considered refugees under the 1951 Convention, and had recognized the property rights of displaced persons. Multi-ethnic commissions had been established to implement the programme, which had also encouraged Croats of Serbian extraction to return. In all, 24,000 of them had been repatriated from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and 23,000 others who had been displaced within Croatia itself had returned to their homes. There were still obstacles to the repatriation of around 100,000 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international community apparently was not sufficiently concerned to create conditions favourable to their return. The situation had also been exacerbated by the arrival of thousands of refugees from Kosovo.

15. Croatia would not have been able to shoulder the burden of large inflows of refugees and displaced persons without the help of the international organizations and, first and foremost, UNHCR. It was regrettable that the return of the refugees should be hampered by a lack of financial resources. The economic recovery of the country was now the main factor in their long-term reintegration. The Government was therefore organizing a conference on the reconstruction and development of the Republic of Croatia, which should help to create the conditions for the thorough social and economic reintegration of the returnees. In that respect, Croatia was well aware of how vital international solidarity and burden-sharing were to the search for durable solutions to the refugee crisis.

16. Mr. OBSIEH WAIS (Observer for Djibouti) said that the international community should give its full support to the host countries that had welcomed, and continued to welcome, hundreds of thousands or even millions of refugees, notwithstanding their own political, economic and social problems. With the help of UNHCR, Djibouti had been able to implement the voluntary repatriation of 36,000 Ethiopians during the past two years. Some 22,000 Somali refugees and a few hundreds of Ethiopians were still in the country. Apart from the groups for which the international community had taken responsibility, through UNHCR, more than 55,000 refugees were living in the city of Djibouti, where the situation was becoming more and more difficult. The Somali refugees' prospects of repatriation were still virtually non-existent even though the situation in their area of origin had

settled down. UNHCR should therefore prepare a project aimed at transferring 15,000 to 20,000 of the Somali refugees, who were mainly from vulnerable groups, into camps in order to alleviate their difficulties. He urged the international community to redouble its efforts to help Djibouti, which had always been a country of asylum, to discharge its humanitarian duties. In the wake of a military crisis that had ended in December 1994, a large number of Djibouti civilians had taken refuge abroad themselves, but it was now not possible for them to return home since the social infrastructure had been destroyed. Those who had already begun to return, most of them women and children and estimated to number around 15,000, still had no shelter and were utterly destitute. Thus far, only UNDP and UNICEF had helped the Government of Djibouti in its attempts to overcome the difficulties it faced in the aftermath of the war.

17. The international community should show greater solidarity with the asylum countries, which were still, generally speaking, developing countries. Action by UNHCR, which had worldwide recognition, was needed more than ever given the existence of so many areas of conflict in the world. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the assistance provided by UNHCR, despite the financial constraints.

18. Mr. N'GORAN (Observer for Côte d'Ivoire) said that burden-sharing was a legal obligation contained in a number of international instruments, including the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. It was, however, regrettable that States did not always accept all that that entailed. Even though the technical support provided by UNHCR and other specialized agencies to host countries constituted a form of burden-sharing, it was not systematic and did not match the sacrifices made by the asylum countries. International instruments defined the obligations of States more clearly than those of regional groups or the international community, whether economic, military or environmental. Within those different areas, the notion of burden-sharing was complicated by the extent of the resources to be mobilized, as well as by the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of quantifying certain contributions.

19. Since the granting of asylum frequently entailed the establishment of multi-sectoral aid programmes, the international community should take a comprehensive approach to the consideration of the concept. Account should be taken of refugees' economic significance when implementing international cooperation policies. The right to asylum sometimes entailed military commitments on States' part in order to ensure refugees' safety, and the containment of crises might call for transborder military actions that could be seen only as part of regional or international obligations. Both cases required what were often substantial financial commitments.

20. Côte d'Ivoire considered that burden-sharing should occur only in serious emergencies. Their seriousness should be assessed in terms of number of refugees and the ability of the asylum country to cope with them. Burden-sharing was also necessary in repatriation operations, since the countries of origin could not on their own meet all the demands imposed by the reintegration of returnees, reconciliation and national reconstruction. Similarly, solving refugee-related environmental and economic problems

required international solidarity in order to rehabilitate affected areas. Côte d'Ivoire, for example, planned to implement a programme of support for the development of their reception area for Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees, after a needs analysis carried out by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and funded by UNDP: he called on all donor countries and financial institutions to support the programme. Given the difficulties of mobilizing the international community, burden-sharing could be used at any time, before or after a refugee crisis. It should not be constrained by highly restrictive rules and there should not be any compensation principle attached, since the organizations' task was to ensure the smooth coordination of humanitarian aid.

21. Mr. PHOUGSAVATH (Observer for the Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that, in view of the worrying increase in the number of refugees, international solidarity and burden-sharing had a vital role to play in finding appropriate responses to crises and avoiding further population movements. He believed that voluntary repatriation was the most realistic and appropriate solution to the refugee problem. He hoped that the developed countries would continue to support UNHCR and the other humanitarian organizations that provided assistance to refugees.

22. In south-east Asia, progress seemed to have been made towards a solution to the problem of Indochinese refugees. The vast majority of Lao refugees abroad, chiefly in Thailand, had been resettled in third countries or had returned home. However, 1,300 of those, who had not been authorized to resettle in the United States of America were still in Thailand. It was now up to the tripartite Lao-Thai-UNHCR commission to find a solution. The Government wanted the repatriation programme to be completed as quickly as possible in order to give the new returnees the opportunity to contribute to the development of the country, which had recently joined the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It was prepared to continue to cooperate with UNHCR in fulfilling that mission and relied on UNHCR to help it resettle the Lao returnees and facilitate their reintegration into the national community. In that regard, he expressed his sincere gratitude to the United States of America, Japan and the European Community, which were funding the UNHCR projects under way in the Lao Democratic People's Republic, and he called on friendly countries, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to make a financial contribution to the humanitarian repatriation programme.

23. Mr. SESINYI (Observer for Botswana) said that his Government had made administrative arrangements to ensure that asylum-seekers were not treated as illegal immigrants. Refugees were requested to register at the offices of UNHCR and with the Botswana Council for Refugees: applications were referred to the Refugee Advisory Committee, which considered it and made a recommendation to the Minister responsible for refugee matters. The Minister gave a favourable decision if Botswana was the country of first asylum. The aim of that policy was to distinguish genuine asylum-seekers from economic migrants. A large number of refugees crossed other countries before choosing Botswana as a country of asylum because of its economic performance and political stability.

24. The Government did not have the means to accept all the asylum-seekers wishing to settle in Botswana. Botswanans would not understand if the austerity measures they had to accept did not apply when taking in refugees. The aim of the policy was to control immigration and not to question respect for the right of asylum. The Government believed that, if the choice of the country of asylum were left to asylum-seekers, the principle of protection would give way to a process of steady migration: it would be preferable for countries to share the burden of hosting refugees on a bilateral basis. Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries had already agreed that any member State that no longer had the resources to cope with the burden could approach other States for assistance at the bilateral level.

25. Ms. TESFAMICHAEL (Observer for Eritrea) said that the people and Government of Eritrea had been striving for seven years to rehabilitate an economy shattered by the war that had led up to independence, and to find a solution to the problem of the diaspora of Eritrean refugees. The Government had given the highest priority to the programme of voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Eritreans driven into exile by the war.

26. However, a number of factors stood in the way of those efforts. In addition to the border conflict that had recently broken out between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Ethiopia was committing gross violations of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Eritrean residents and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin in Ethiopia. Since the dispute had begun in May 1998, the Ethiopian Government had launched a campaign of mass deportations, torture and arbitrary detention against those groups, with forcible separation from their families and confiscation of their property. Ethiopia's crimes against humanity were attested to by verifiable sources, such as reports of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Secretary-General, representatives of third countries and ICRC. Unless the international community took the necessary corrective measures, such ethnic cleansing operations and irresponsible actions would have dangerous implications for the peace, stability and security of the region.

27. The Government of Eritrea renounced the principle of the use of force and remained committed to searching for a peaceful, legal resolution of the conflict. It had also submitted a constructive proposal to that effect. Despite Ethiopia's allegations, Ethiopian residents in Eritrea had not been subject to any illegal or hostile action and their right to live and work in peace in Eritrea had been guaranteed by the National Assembly. The Government had invited impartial observers to visit Eritrea to investigate the human rights situation and was actively cooperating in that regard with various competent bodies.

28. Given the social and economic disruption and hardship resulting from the crimes of the Ethiopian leadership, a serious humanitarian crisis seemed imminent unless concrete measures were taken to avert it and to prevail on Ethiopia to stop violating the rights of ethnic Eritreans. She therefore called on the international community to cooperate in helping the victims of Ethiopian violence.

29. Mr. DEMBELE (Observer for Mali) said that the case of some 150,000 Malian refugees forced to leave the country by armed conflict in the north of

Mali was approaching a solution, and nearly all of them had returned to their homes. Their return had been made possible by repatriation programmes carried out by UNHCR and the Government of Mali, in conjunction with the host countries. His delegation expressed its gratitude to the High Commissioner for Refugees and her collaborators, to the neighbouring countries, which had given asylum to Malian refugees for several years, and to the international community and the donors who had made it possible for the programmes to be implemented.

30. Solidarity and burden-sharing should be achieved in the first place through the fulfilment, at the political level, of the commitments entered into under the conventions and legal instruments relating to refugees. For the international community that involved giving support to the asylum countries - which were frequently beset by economic and social development problems - in order to facilitate the reception and protection of refugees and, after the refugees had left, in rehabilitating areas damaged as a result of their stay. Aid should also be granted to the countries or areas of origin in order to permit reconstruction and the reintegration of returnees. Countries must also make available to UNHCR, in timely fashion, the resources that were needed for it to be able to carry out its mission effectively.

31. A variety of factors could contribute to good handling of the refugee problem: the prevention of conflicts and crises that might lead to mass population displacements, the equitable sharing among several countries, including northern countries, of the burden of hosting refugees, support for the efforts required of developing countries by refugee inflows and, lastly, the granting of the aid required by both countries of origin and host countries.

32. Mr. KAVADZE (Observer for Georgia) expressed his Government's gratitude to the High Commissioner for Refugees and her staff for their assistance to the hundreds of thousands of persons in Georgia who had been forcibly displaced as a result of the actions of Abkhaz separatists. He also thanked the donors from various countries for the help they had given through contributions. Given the multiplicity of the causes of the problem of displacements, its solution was naturally also very complex.

33. The Government of Georgia had repeatedly emphasized the threat that separatism represented to world stability. Neighbouring countries had finally acknowledged the reality of that threat, so there was now some hope that efforts to deal with it at the international level would be stepped up. Several international organizations had been apprised of the issue of the conflict in Abkhazia, which, as had frequently been emphasized, should be resolved within the framework of the territorial integrity of Georgia, ensuring the prompt return of the hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons to their homes. The Government remained determined to find a peaceful solution by political means and continued to negotiate with the Abkhaz leadership. Nevertheless, it had to be acknowledged that little progress had been made in settling the conflict.

34. The punitive operations conducted by the Abkhaz side in the Gali region in May 1998 had forced 40,000 ethnic Georgians off their land and had culminated in the loss of human life and the destruction of 1,400 dwellings

that had been rebuilt with help from UNHCR. That tragedy had come about partly owing to the fact that neither the Security Council resolutions nor the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) decisions on the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population in Abkhazia had been implemented. Acts of violence continued to occur and, with the onset of winter, emergency aid was essential for the affected population. Since the Georgian Government's resources were limited, continued UNHCR support was the only way to solve the problem. He therefore appealed to donor countries to increase their contributions to the UNHCR budget in order to meet the needs of a further 40,000 displaced persons in Zugdidi and to ensure humanitarian monitoring of the 10,000 civilians still in Gali. Economic programmes should also be developed in order to promote the post-conflict peace process, using an approach similar to that adopted in settling the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and reconstructing the social and economic infrastructure of the conflict zone.

35. With regard to the problem of the Turks and Muslim Georgians from the Meskheti region of Georgia, the Georgian authorities had decided to allow the systematic repatriation of those deported by the Soviet regime: the process was being carried out to the extent possible and without undue haste. One problem of a legal nature remained to be settled, in which the experience of UNHCR could prove very useful: the question of the legal status of the property left behind by forcibly displaced persons and confiscated by Abkhaz separatists. UNHCR could participate actively in resolving the issue by adopting legally binding international legislation to guarantee the enjoyment of the right to property in such cases and providing for the restitution of property lost as a result of population displacement, or for compensation for such losses.

36. Mr. RANA (Observer for Kenya) said that UNHCR, like other humanitarian organizations and voluntary agencies, worked under difficult and dangerous conditions to try to alleviate the plight of displaced persons. The current global economic recession had brought hardship not only to the nationals of the countries concerned, but also to the refugees they hosted. The flare-up of tensions and conflicts contributed to instability and to a constant movement of people seeking refugee status. Yet the resources available were shrinking even as the number of displaced persons in need of help increased.

37. States' responsibility towards refugees was not only to welcome them and give them shelter, in accordance with their obligations under the relevant international instruments, but also to find ways of establishing a lasting peace. Conflict resolution strategies should be developed in order to reduce internal disturbances and make it possible for countries to develop. His delegation therefore welcomed the initiative taken by the United Nations, through the High Commissioner for Refugees, and OAU in organizing a regional interministerial meeting, held in May 1998, on refugee issues in the Great Lakes region. The initiative, which had been a step towards finding a solution, should be expanded.

38. Kenya had been in the forefront of mediation between the various parties to the conflicts in the region, through regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Over the years, it had hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees. The Government subscribed to

international measures to ensure the protection of refugees, once their status had been determined. The contributions of various Governments, NGOs and voluntary organizations to the Kenyan refugee programmes had been of great assistance. Such efforts showed that the international community was willing to help deal with the refugee problem. However, material help at the camp level remained inadequate, as did the provision of education and training to help refugees to reintegrate into their countries of origin. Kenya appreciated the efforts by various Governments to facilitate the resettlement of refugees on their territories. In implementing such programmes, it was also necessary to give consideration to refugees with particular needs, such as women, unaccompanied children, older persons and the disabled.

39. Mr. OUEDRAOGO (Observer for Burkina Faso), recalling that Africa held the somewhat depressing record for the number of refugees and displaced persons, paid tribute to the African countries that took them in and frequently suffered for it in social, economic and ecological terms. He appealed to the international community to give firmer support to such countries, whose economies were already fragile.

40. It was, however, important to go beyond solidarity and address the causes of the problem, namely conflicts, human rights violations, political, ethnic and religious intolerance and extreme poverty: an awareness of the problem was therefore required at all levels. On the continent of Africa, efforts were being made at the regional, subregional and national levels to meet that requirement. The encouraging results achieved by the conflict prevention, management and resolution mechanism set up by OAU, for example, other crisis-containment initiatives taken by subregional organizations and the reforms under way at the national level showed that Africa was capable of assuming its responsibilities, provided that the international community gave it the support it needed.

41. For its part, Burkina Faso had never failed to show solidarity for other States in the search for durable solutions to refugee problems. After the successful repatriation of the Malian and Nigerian Tuareg refugees, others known as "urban refugees" continued to be received into the country in ever-increasing numbers. In that respect, the international community's understanding and the cooperation of UNHCR would be vital to the implementation of the resettlement programme that had recently begun.

42. Mr. CASTRO GRANDE (Observer for El Salvador) said that his country fully endorsed the declaration made by the delegation of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States on the theme under discussion. He drew attention to the fact that, on 29 September 1998, UNHCR had closed its San Salvador office, after 11 years of intensive activity. During that time, UNHCR had helped 32,400 Salvadoran refugees to return and reintegrate. It had also provided protection and assistance to refugees from other Central American countries chiefly Nicaraguans in El Salvador. The Government of El Salvador thanked UNHCR and the entire international community for the assistance which they had provided and without which it would not have been possible to find durable solutions to the problems of returnees and refugees.

43. With regard to the reception and care of refugees, the Government had prepared draft legislation to establish new government departments responsible

for granting refugee status and new procedures to speed up the processing of applications. Refugee status determination would now be the responsibility of the Ministries of Public Security, Internal Affairs and External Affairs, while aid to refugees would be provided by Caritas, the organization appointed by UNHCR. While the Government welcomed the fact that the Guatemalan refugee repatriation programme was nearing completion, it noted with concern that the final phase of the programme was at risk owing to UNHCR's lack of resources. He endorsed Guatemala's appeal to donor countries to help UNHCR complete the operation.

44. Ms. ARES (Observer for Chile) said that the crises that had occurred recently around the world - the Great Lakes region, for example - demonstrated how much damage mass population displacements could cause in host countries, many of which were themselves plagued by conflict or social and economic problems. They had also shown the importance of development and the need for the international community to give those countries the help they needed. While there was certainly a need for preventive or early warning measures in order to avoid the outbreaks of social conflict that characterized such crises, it was equally necessary to invest in development aid, a solution that would always be preferable to maintaining refugee camps.

45. The international community's commitment to solidarity and burden-sharing was a key factor in ensuring the protection of refugees, giving them the help they required and finding durable solutions for them. The efforts required of developing countries and countries in transition, which were those that most frequently hosted refugees, were so great that only international solidarity would enable them to cope with such situations. It was therefore more urgent than ever, when humanitarian emergencies occurred, to consider preparing a world development aid programme that would benefit both the refugees' countries of origin and the host countries. The Chilean Government, for its part, in collaboration with UNHCR, had decided to launch a programme aimed at resettling a small group of families from the former Yugoslavia, in accordance with an undertaking made at the Executive Committee's 1996 and 1997 sessions. It hoped by that gesture to make a contribution to the search for durable solutions to the refugee problem, in accordance with the tradition of solidarity that had always characterized the history of democracy in Chile.

46. Mr. KULUE (Observer for Liberia) said that, since the launch of the voluntary repatriation programme in the first quarter of 1998, nearly 80,000 Liberian refugees had been helped to return by UNHCR and around 200,000 others had returned to the country by their own means. Unfortunately, despite the Government's security guarantees, a large number of them had returned to their asylum countries owing to a lack of sufficient social infrastructure to support them. Of around 600,000 Liberian refugees in various West African countries, only half were thought to have returned to their country of origin. It was therefore time for UNHCR to consider the possibility of transferring to Liberia the programmes to help refugees in asylum countries. In order to speed up the repatriation process, the absorption capacities of areas of return should be enhanced by, for example, building schools or organizing income-generating activities. It would also be desirable for UNHCR to become a focal point for the coordination of the many international NGOs implementing reintegration projects at the community level in Liberia.

47. Apart from the problem of repatriation, Liberia also had to deal with the security threat posed by the conflict in Sierra Leone. Although its economy was in ruins after a long civil crisis, Liberia was host to more than 120,000 Sierra Leonean refugees and had provided them with large tracts of land. The Liberian Government also guaranteed them freedom of movement and respect for their fundamental human rights and had taken steps to ensure their safety. In order to facilitate their repatriation, the Government was working with other countries of the subregion to help re-establish a lasting peace in Sierra Leone and had requested OAU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations to position observers along the border in order to lay to rest the allegations that Liberia was supporting the rebels in Sierra Leone. The Government was collaborating with UNHCR to ensure that persons accused of engaging in activities amounting to crimes against humanity were separated from the refugee population, but additional resources were needed in order to improve refugee protection.

48. His Government was also concerned about the question of internally displaced persons, a problem that had affected almost the entire population at the time of the crisis in Liberia. Whereas refugees could receive help with repatriation, no United Nations body or humanitarian organization had a specific mandate to deal with internally displaced persons, who became the responsibility of their Government. His delegation therefore urged UNHCR to monitor the plight of that vulnerable group and took the opportunity to renew Liberia's invitation to the High Commissioner to visit the country in order to assess the situation on the ground.

49. Ms. TESFAYE (Ethiopia), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, noted that the delegation of Ethiopia had referred to Eritrean aggression in its earlier statement merely because that act was likely to give rise to serious problems for which UNHCR must be prepared. With regard to the substance of the matter, no one could deny the fact of Eritrea's aggression against Ethiopia on 12 May against Ethiopia: the United States of America and Rwanda, as well as OAU, had confirmed the occupation by Eritrea. To say that Ethiopia was the aggressor was an insult to the intelligence of the international community and the members of the Committee. The same applied to the allegation that Eritreans had been deported from Ethiopia. That was nothing more than a tactic used by Eritrea to divert attention from its act of aggression. Ethiopia in fact abided strictly by the principles of international law, despite the challenge it was facing. Ethiopia was not dealing with the usual kind of Government. When the President of Eritrea had publicly stated that his country had the capacity to strike at the heart of Ethiopia and that it was not difficult to create a feeling of insecurity there, it had been felt that those Eritreans known to be involved in the wide network of clandestine cells established in Ethiopia by the ruling party in Eritrea should be asked to leave Ethiopia. In any case, the region's latest humanitarian tragedy was a result of Eritrean aggression and would no doubt end as soon as Eritrea vacated Ethiopian territory. The delegation of Ethiopia once again requested the international community to ensure compliance with the law and to support the peace efforts made by OAU, whose Secretary-General had become the new target of the Eritrean authorities.

50. Mr. MARUME (Democratic Republic of Congo), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that his delegation was obliged to correct the falsehoods

stated by the representative of Rwanda about the war being waged on the Congolese people. Her accusations had been all the more astonishing for being made by a country from which the Democratic Republic of the Congo - the former Zaire - had accepted more than 2.5 million refugees since 1959. Neither the people nor the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who had always accepted difference, but rejected hatred, were responsible for Rwanda's recurrent dramas. Rwanda appeared to be resorting to disinformation in order to disguise its own responsibilities and giving little thought to its own refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His delegation reserved the right to publish a statement at a later time that would fully clarify the question.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.